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ASPECTS OF THE STUDY OF HISTORY

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It is my pleasant task to bring to your attention and urge upon your consideration a branch of human study—department of knowledge—which while not highly conducive to material ends, is yet most highly practical in its nature and admirably suited to widen, deepen and project the life. The subject is History.

And first of all, let us endeavor, with such care as we may in a few moments, to reach a just conception of history: for on the answer to the oft-recurring question, what is history? obviously depend its real importance and value.

The original Greek conception of *historia* was that of research, or investigation. Not the rigidly scientific method of research employed by historical critics today, but an investigation into and a setting forth of the great deeds of illustrious men, often with distinct bias. "Show me," Savage Landor makes one of his heroes say, "how great projects were executed, great advantages gained, and great calamities averted. Show me the generals and the statesmen who stood foremost, that I may bend to them in reverence. Let the books of the treasury lie closed as religiously as the Sibyl's. Leave weights and measures in the market place; commerce in the harbor; the arts in the lights they love; philosophy in the shade. Place History on her rightful throne, and at the sides of her—Eloquence and War." The Greeks "did not regard history as the simple narration of what had happened in the past, but rather (to use the words of Professor H. Morse Stephens) as a certain arrangement of a narrative of events so as to bring out certain ideas." Some of the most conspicuous merits of Herodotus, as his simplicity and credulous good faith, would today, I fear, go far to condemn a writer in the eyes of historical criticism. It would be a doubtful compliment to a diligent historian to tell him he is a capital story teller. So Thucydides, the first of the philosophic historians, owes his brilliancy not so much to an accurate and impartial account of the age of which he wrote as to the faultlessly constructed speeches he put into his characters' mouths, but which in truth they never delivered.

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1. Pericles and Aspasia. Quoted by Lecky, *Pol. Value of Hist.*, 10-11.
 2. Syllabus, *History of Writing History*, 5.

Modern conceptions of history are very numerous and widely different in scope; yet in all there is somewhat of common ground. In a comprehensive view these will for most part be found to be but different aspects of the one great truth. History is biography, we are told by Carlyle with oft-repeated emphasis. It is best understood from personalities. "The function of the historian," says Froude, "is to discover and make known great men." Emerson explains all history from the individual: "All public facts are to be generalized. Then at once History becomes fluid and true, Biography deep and sublime." So President Wheeler postulates, in his *Alexander the Great*, "History and Biography blend."

One step removed from this aspect of the biographies of heroes is the poet-philosopher's view that history is a great epic. "He (Carlyle) says it is a part of his creed that history is poetry, could we but tell it right." The only poetry there is is history. "All history is an imprisoned Epic, nay an imprisoned Psalm and Prophecy." Is there not then more of essential truth in the Homeric poem or the Shakespearean drama than in the jejune annals of the early chroniclers? "History has its foreground; and it is principally in the management of the perspective that one artist differs from another."¹ Macaulay here states an important partial-truth; and he is the consummate artist in the arrangement of glittering perspective.

But history, or the writing of history, is no longer to be considered only as an art. History is a science. Indeed, recent thought has so magnified the critical and rigidly scientific, frequently at the expense of the artistic and even the literary, that we are in danger of not being able soon to recover fully our sense of the beautiful and the picturesque in historical writing. Under the exhortation to leave off "fine writing" and rhetorical antithesis and account for everything in the calm, judicial spirit with scientific accuracy, are we not in danger of compromising the beauty, the attractiveness, the truth itself, of history? of making of real heroes mere colossal machines or veriest puppets? History viewed as science "is an attempt to interpret human life and human character by the record, however imperfect, of men's actions and their thoughts."² Can any science be more interesting or more dignified? But, after all, history cannot be claimed as an exact science. While we apply to historical construction a certain scientific methodology, it must be remembered that "Every historical image contains a large part of fancy."³ Adopting the words of Langlois and Seignobos: "The realities of the past are things which we do not observe, and which

1. Macaulay, *Essays*, I, 129.

2. Atkinson, *History and the Study of History*, 42-43.

3. Langlois and Seignobos, *Introd. to Study of History*, 222.

we can only know in virtue of their resemblance to the realities of the present.”¹ Their study involves “an application of the descriptive sciences which deal with humanity, descriptive psychology, sociology or social science; but all these sciences are still but imperfectly established, and their defects retard the establishment of a science of history.” The biologic concept of society, so recently urged in many quarters, has suffered many and serious reverses. The methods of the physical and biological sciences, resting upon objective observation, cannot be bodily super-imposed upon historical study, which clearly demands the subjective method in dealing with a developing social consciousness. Thomas Buckle, in his erudite history of civilization, made a heroic effort to reduce history to the status of a natural science. Everything, including the actions of men, was to be governed by strict law fully discoverable. The writings of Buckle teach a sort of historic fatalism, “reducing almost to nothing the action of individualities.”² His efforts necessarily failed: it is safe to say his exact science of history has never yet been established. I know of no more significant commentary on this aspect of the subject than Professor H. Morse Stephens’ Presidential Address before the American Historical Association, December, 1915, in which he confesses, with evident sadness, that “as student and teacher of history he has come to realize more and more the futility of pretended impartiality; and at the last he has yielded to the conviction that the first duty of the historical scholar is to grasp the fact that his limitations as a human being must ever debar him, even if the most complete material lies ready to his hand; from attempting more than a personal interpretation of some part or period of the past.”³

At the opposite pole from the *ultra*-scientific stand such writers as Carlyle, Creasy and Lecky. “The older one becomes,” said Lecky, “the more clearly one sees that King Hazard fashions three-fourths of the events in this miserable world.” “Pascal tells us,” he quotes, “that if Cleopatra’s nose had been shorter, the whole face of the world might have been changed.” “Arletta’s pretty feet, twinkling in the brook,” wrote Creasy, “made her the mother of William the Conqueror. Had she not thus fascinated Duke Robert, the Liberal of Normandy, Harold would not have fallen at Hastings, no Anglo-Norman dynasty could have arisen, no British Empire.”⁴

I must forego further illustration of the fortuitous and picturesque to remark that history is concerned with the *truth* about man.

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1. *Op. cit.*, 224.
 2. Lecky, *Political Value of History*, 26.
 3. *Am. Hist. Review*, Jan., 1916, 225.
 4. *Decisive Battles*, ch. VIII.

Down to the middle of the nineteenth century history was reckoned a branch of literature. It is only in the last generation that the cardinal aim of historical writing has been generally discerned as knowledge, or truth pure and simple. It cannot now be too strongly emphasized that the first and most essential criterion of historical writing is its truthfulness.¹ But, interposes Macaulay, "perfectly and absolutely true it cannot be; for to be perfectly and absolutely true, it ought to record all the slightest particulars of the slightest actions. If history were written thus, the Bodleian library would not contain the occurrences of a single week,"—and, he might have added, the world would presently be filled with literary lumber. Hence we should qualify our statement and observe that history is concerned with the *important*. "The trivial must be eliminated. It is only the important, vital, enduring facts and ideas that go to make up history."² The various peoples and states are to be studied comparatively. Professor Freeman has laid great emphasis on the comparative method. "My position, then," said he, "is that in all our studies of history and language . . . we must cast away all distinctions of 'ancient' and 'modern,' of 'dead' and 'living,' and must boldly grapple with the great fact of the unity of history."³ The best text-book writers of today are coming to accept the truth uttered long since by him when he pointed out, "We are learning that European history, from its first glimmerings to our own day, is one unbroken drama, no part of which can be rightly understood without reference to the other parts which come before and after it." It was Thomas Arnold who first taught that the political history of the world should be read as inter-related parts of a great unity. Ancient and modern, religious and political, are rolled together into the one long record of a related, unified Humanity.

We observe, also, in seeking data for a definition of history, with Professor Johnston, that "Man is the first postulate of history. He is the beginning and the end of it. He enacts it; he tells it; he accepts it as a message or gospel for guidance and self-realization."⁴ History, then, in its broad acceptance of the study of developing man—primitive man, man in civil society, man in politics and in the church, man wherever he touches *men*—is the most comprehensive and difficult, as well as the most attractive of all sciences. The historian must employ as handmaids to his study many other sciences. Indeed, there is no department of knowledge with which the perfect historian must not be familiar. Because History's

1. *Cf.*, Johnston, A. H. A. 1893, p. 49; Langlois and Seignobos, 303.
2. Johnson, *op. cit.*, 50.
3. Unity of History, 303.
4. *Op. cit.*, 47.

horizon is so extended, the perfect historian is yet to seek. "The perfect historian," wrote Macaulay, "is he in whose work the character and spirit of the age is exhibited in miniature. He relates no fact, he attributes no expression to his character which is not authenticated by sufficient testimony. But by judicious selection, rejection and arrangement, he gives to truth those attractions which have been usurped by fiction. . . . He shows us the court, the camp and the senate. But he shows us also the nation. Man will not merely be described but will be made intimately known to us. A historian such as we have been attempting to describe would indeed be an intellectual prodigy. In his mind powers scarcely compatible with each other must be tempered into an exquisite harmony. We shall sooner see another Shakespeare or another Homer." Let us not be dismayed if we fall short of Macaulay's unattainable ideal!

Before attempting finally to define history, it will be well to mention one or two misconceptions for the sake of avoiding them. And first, chronology is not history. It should be a solace and a spur as well to the plodding youth to remember that learning history does not consist solely in the learning of dates. "Let us suppose," says Atkinson, "that you have got painfully into your memories, in their proper order, all the kings of England and Europe, and all the battles, . . . and all the rest of the compendium. You have no more got history than a man has got a house who has simply put up the frame of it." Insight is rather to be sought than information. The well-crammed cranium, without penetration and creative power, is imbecile. Annals, chronicles, and memoirs abound in the materials of history, but alone they do not constitute it.

Another misconception is that history is constituted of mere costume, or picturesque narrative. While there are many things in history that are picturesque, history itself must rest on the firm basis of important, ascertained facts and phenomena. Well selected fiction is an invaluable accessory to historical reading; but the chances are that he deceives himself who thinks that he reads real history in the novel. The vivacious descriptions of mediaeval chivalry in the novels of Sir Walter Scott, while possessing elements of truth and human interest, fail to disclose the prosaic dullness and hateful countenance of much of feudal society.

What, then, is history? Is it the book I hold in my hand—that is, a more or less complete narration and personal interpretation of the life of people; or is it the actual events and characters that have been imperfectly portrayed in the printed page; or is it the unfolding process of knowledge, the gradual emergence and course of social self-consciousness, which comprehends events and char-

acters and renders the book both possible and useful? In some proper sense it is all these if not still more than these. History is a harmonious combination, or synthesis, in due subordination, of the several partial conceptions and various aspects.

It must be remarked here, however, as is clearly hinted in the above questions, that history has its subjective and its objective side; that is to say, the empirical perception and apprehension by men of their related experience and social growth, and the events themselves—the overt acts—that mark the advancing subjective stages. Let me try to illustrate by means of the American Declaration of Independence. Certain forces, including geographical separation from the mother country, geographical unity over-seas, substantial ethnical unity and identity of interests “conspired, at last, to awaken the consciousness of the people of the thirteen colonies to the fact that they had attained the natural conditions of a sovereignty—a state.” Here was the subjective reality, an emerging social self-consciousness. “The revolution,” as Professor Burgess points out, “was an accomplished fact before the declaration of 1776, and so was independence. The act of the Fourth of July was a notification to the world of *faits accomplis*. . . . The significance of the proclamation was this: a people testified thereby the consciousness of the fact that they had become, in the progressive development of history, one whole, separate and adult nation, and that they were determined to defend this natural status against the now no longer natural supremacy of a foreign state.” Finally, a contemporaneous or subsequent narrative of the subjective and objective phases of our great Declaration by a student of national life furnishes us with a third concept of history, namely, historical writing. Perfectly and absolutely accurate historical writing cannot be: even if we should grant that every detail of every event may be recorded with absolute fidelity, the narration would still be essentially untrue if it failed to reveal the *Zeitgeist*, to body forth the living atmosphere of time and place.

At this point one is tempted to indulge in some speculation on the philosophy of history, but it is emphatically true that a little philosophy is a dangerous thing. There is at least much truth in Hegel's dictum of human development conceived as a great process of self-realization. Subjectively, then, history is the progress in the larger consciousness of freedom: it becomes an active, self-conscious process of knowledge, ascertaining the world-life of humanity. Correcting the deductions of Hegel by the inductions of Spencer, we have the data of the evolution of society. In the noble words of Droysen: “History is humanity becoming and being

1. Burgess, Political Science, I, 100.
2. *Ib.*

conscious concerning itself. The epochs of History are not the life periods of this 'I' of Humanity; . . . but they are stages of that ego's self-knowledge, its knowledge of the world and of God." Again: "To apprehend the moral world historically means to apprehend it according to its development and growth, according to the causal succession of its movements."

We are only beginning to recognize the stupendous force of the fact of human sociality. No man liveth to himself alone. "In plain prose," wrote Professor Small, nearly twenty years ago, "our lives, ourselves, are atoms of the life of humanity that has been working to form us through all the ages." In the most recent textbook of sociology we read: "One's life is not his own, but is his share in the inheritance which comes down from a long social past, in turn to be transmitted, improved or degraded, to his successors."²

Society is just now becoming intelligent about itself. After untold centuries of association by men, the social mind becomes a concrete, if not organic reality, social consciousness emerges. Long after the dawning of the social consciousness, however, comes the social self-consciousness, which enables society to contemplate itself as an objectified reality and entity, and to set before itself the attainment of definite social aims. Without pursuing the thought further, it is sufficient to suggest that the solution of the problem of social teleology lies in the fact, as pointed out by Small, that, "The necessary working basis of social improvement today is accordingly the body of judgments lodged in the minds of living men about the things that are essentially desirable." It follows that, "There can be no very stable theories of social action until there are convincing standards of social aim."³

Having at length gained some conception of history itself, let us inquire, what is there attractive about history? Wherein lies its peculiar value? Can the busy youth of today really learn anything about history? It must be obvious that one cannot in a single paper fully answer these and numerous questions that suggest themselves. My main purpose, therefore, is now to set forth rapidly several practical considerations with the hope that they may suggest avenues of thought, and leave their more complete discussion and elaboration to others.

I hold that no study is in itself more attractive than history, or selected portions of history. Fact is always preferred to fiction, provided it is equally interesting. Even little children are delighted to learn that heroes were real, live men instead of make-believes,

1. *Am. Journ. of Sociology*, Sept., '97, p. 150.
2. Hayes, *Introd. to Sociology*, 355.
3. *Op. cit.*, 170.

and history is the record of the doings of humanity. Young men study physics, mathematics, manual training, and the like: but in such a list of subjects something is wanting to the complete rational education. "It is the play of Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark," says Frederic Harrison.

"The proper study of mankind is man." "Whilst man is wanting, all the rest remains vague, and incomplete, and aimless." The one subject, the first postulate of history, is *man*. The paleolithic ax is a historical source, for it tells us of primitive man: the metropolitan newspaper is the greatest commentary on today's humanity. History is man's telegraph of the ages: its records bring us into converse with the nations of remotest past. With sound reason and telling force did the Committee of Seven on the Study of History in the Schools affirm: "If it is desirable that the High School pupil should know the physical world, that he should know the habits of ants and bees, the laws of floral growth, the simple reactions in the chemical retort, it is certainly even more desirable that he should be led to see the steps in the development of the human race, and should have some dim perception of his own place, and of his country's place, in the great movements of men."¹

The present is indissolubly bound to the past, which it cannot, even by the most colossal effort, throw entirely off. History is essential to progress. "Suppose . . . a man to be interested in any study whatever," to quote once more Mr. Harrison, "either in promoting general education, or eager to acquire knowledge for himself. He will find, at every step he takes, that he is appealing to the authority of the past, is using the ideas of former ages, or carrying out principles established by ancient but not forgotten thinkers. If he studies geometry, he will find that the first textbook put into his hand was written by a Greek 2000 years ago. If he takes up a grammar, he will be only repeating rules taught by Roman school-masters or professors. Or is he interested in art? He will find the same thing in a far greater degree . . . the moment he begins to act, to live or to think, he must use the materials presented to him, and . . . he can as little free himself from the influence of former generations as he can free himself from his personal identity; unlearn all that he has learned; cease to be what his previous life has made him, and blot out of his memory all recollection whatever."² Let one despise history as he will, he cannot escape it, he cannot utterly ignore it: let him be separated from mankind as was Robinson Crusoe; still he carries with him—it may be unconsciously—somewhat of history's rich legacy. If it were possible for one to render himself wholly in-

1. Com. of Seven, Rep., 16-17.

2. *Op. cit.*, 4.

dependent of the past and of the present human environment, he would be little more than primitive man.

History is absolutely fundamental. Attention to its lessons makes men wisely conservative: wise conservatism leads to enduring progress. To be specific, note the ideal for legislators set by that eminent sociologist, the late Lester F. Ward: "History furnishes the statesman an additional basis for legislation . . . No man should consider himself qualified to legislate for a people who is not conversant with the history of modern nations at least, with their various systems of finance, revenue, taxation, public works, education, land surveying, patent and copyright law, military and naval equipment, general jurisprudence and constitutional, statute, and unwritten law. It will, of course, be said that few legislators are thus informed, and this is true, but these few will be the ones who will do most to shape the action of the State and will furnish examples to all who aspire to play a leading part in the political drama." It is by a proper interpretation of history that man throws himself into the stream of previous human endeavor and assists to carry on the work of the ages.

At this point may I quote the calm judgment of a thoughtful and suggestive writer as to the value of history to young men, Professor Wm. P. Atkinson, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: "In my serious judgment no study is half so valuable to young men engaged in the active pursuits of real life, as the real study of History, and all the preparatory and collateral work which a real study of History implies. I say a real study of History; for I do not mean by it that petty memorizing of miserable compendiums, the 'moths of history,' as Bacon long ago called them, which goes on in schools; nor do I mean . . . that pottering over the mere gossip of the past, that perusal of volume upon volume of 'memoirs of the unmemorable,' which passes for History with antiquarians. . . . By the study of History I mean that robust and manly grappling with the real problems of the Past which will make you more thoughtful, more useful, more far-seeing and wide-seeing men in the Present. . . . History is the record of the life of the past. It shows how the men of the past solved the ethical, religious, social, economic, political problems in their day and generation. The purpose of the wise man's studies is to learn how to solve his own life problem."²

Mr. Atkinson's statement is cogent and comprehensive. It presumes collateral study of certain theoretical subjects. Thus, says Professor Seeley, "industrial facts cannot be understood without political economy, nor military facts without military science, nor

1. *Psychic Factors of Civilization*, 311.
2. *Right Use of Books*, 28-9.

legal facts without legal science, nor constitutional and legislative development without political science. I have gone further and laid it down that these theoretical subjects are the real object for which historical facts are collected and authenticated."

But we must not imagine that we can vitalize the past unless we can appreciate the history that is being enacted all about us. I have elsewhere said: "Local history is of value as furnishing, as it were, a first horizon or circumference to the young, expanding mind. As all knowledge proceeds from the known to the unknown, so the activities of other peoples in by-gone ages are made real to the pupil by process of ever-widening circumferences, in each case the point of departure being the *here* and the *now*." History lies all about us and is daily in the making; much real history may be learned without reference to the ponderous and musty tomes of the library shelves.

But history is pre-eminently a knowledge of man's achievement in many ages, acquired through many books; and good books are the delight of an awakened intellect. It was the poet Southey who once affirmed that the greatest pleasure in the world, next to domestic happiness, is that which is felt on opening a box of new books. Erasmus, that most zealous disciple of the New Learning, on one occasion wrote: "I have given up my whole soul to Greek learning, and as soon as I get any money I shall buy Greek books,—and then I shall buy some clothes." "Consider what you have in the smallest chosen library," says Emerson. "A company of the wisest and wittiest men that could be picked out of all countries in a thousand years have set in order the results of their learning and wisdom." Have a passion for books; treat good books as you would treat best friends. Bacon has finely called them "ships of thought," "voyaging through the sea of time and carrying their precious freight so safely from generation to generation." Hear Cicero's beautiful expression of History: "The witness of past ages, the light of truth, the life of memory, the guide of life, and the messenger of antiquity."

The history of the races and of mankind is worthy of study for its own sake—for its very truth—as a means of culture. It should be studied, again, because through its pursuit the imagination is rationally cultivated. A cultivated imagination, which is akin to philosophical insight and poetic instinct, is in some measure essential in commercial life, in social betterment, and in the interpretation of history itself and a just application of its truths to existing conditions. Let no student be guilty of asserting, "I hate

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1. In *Hall's Methods*, 199.
 2. *Green, Short History*, 306.
 3. In *Atkinson, op. cit.*, 64.

history." Such a one has never well considered what it is he hates. He hates he knows not what; for surely he could never with seriousness assert: "I hate all the good and the great of all ages; I hate the illustrious law-giver, the wise reformer, the conquering hero; I hate the train of antecedents which have opened up this new world of freedom and cradled me in constitutional and religious liberty;—all these I steadfastly hate, and renounce all desire to know of them."

Let us then turn to history for its true and ennobling lessons, not with selfish desire or mercenary purpose. With Harrison: "Let this be our test of what history is and what it is not, that it teaches us something of the advance of human progress, that it tells us of some of those mighty spirits who have left their mark on all time, that it shows us the nations of the earth woven together in one purpose, or is lit up with those great ideas and those great purposes which have kindled the conscience of mankind." The intellectual, the aesthetic, the social, and the ethical meet and combine in history: "Its most precious lessons are moral ones. It expands the range of our own vision and teaches us in judging the true interests of nations to look beyond the immediate future." So writes Lecky.¹ "History, indeed," said E. F. Coudert, "is of no use and preaches in a desert if its ghastly record bears with it no fruit in the way of lesson or of sermon."²

As students, as teachers, as men in society, I would exhort you to study history with earnest purpose. Make the test and prove that it is attractive, vitalizing, energizing, moral. Then may you sing with Emerson, the poet, the historian, the philosopher:

"I am owner of the sphere,
Of the seven stars and the solar year,
Of Caesar's hand and Plato's brain,
Of Lord Christ's heart, and Shakespeare's strain."

1. *Op. cit.*, 10.

2. *Pol. Value of History*, 52.

3. *Forum*, July, 1894.